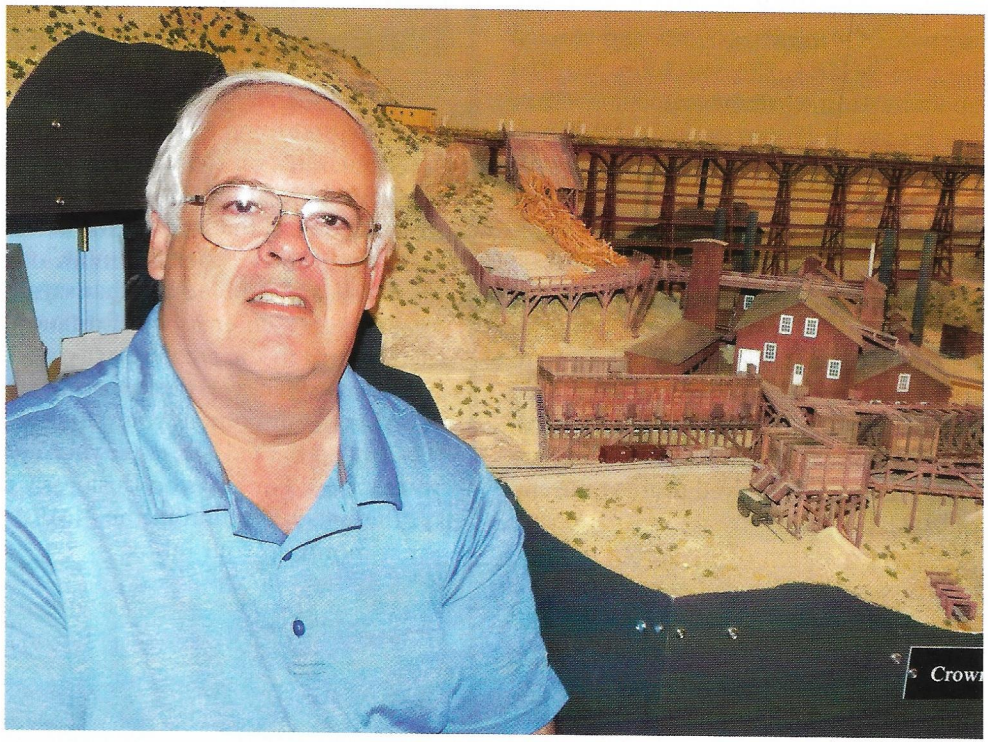
Don Cipolla
Earns
Master Model Railroader® #760



Like many of the MMR® biographies, my model railroading introduction occurred at an early age. I have photos of me at 11 months old standing among my dad's annual Christmas tree Lionel layout. As the years progressed, the operation increased in size, reaching a point where some furniture had to be removed from the living room for the holidays. Dad constructed many scale buildings from balsa; amazingly, a few survived heavy use by three boys and numerous grandchildren. I have a coaling tower he built and one of his 1950s Santa Fe Lionel passenger trains on a guest room display shelf.

My dad instilled in me a "pay attention to detail" mentality — probably why I like researching and modeling as accurately as possible. When I began commuting to the University of Illinois – Chicago for my chemical engineering education, Dad suggested building a layout in the basement and I jumped at the chance. We chose HO scale plan No. 48 in Kalmbach's "101 Track Plans For Model Railroaders" because it fit the available space. The track plan was based on Nevada's Virginia & Truckee Railroad.

We dove in headfirst by deciding to hand-lay track. I am unsure if wood ties were available then, but our method was to cut thousands of wood matchsticks to tie length. A tool & die maker by trade, my dad soon had filing, soldering, and spiking jigs for No. 6 turnout parts. He even built a rail-bending jig that made laying curves easier by not wrestling with the rail. I'm still using those tools 45-plus years later.

A move to Ohio after graduation to begin my engineering career doomed my first layout, but my enthusiasm for V&T continued to grow. My wife Chris and I started searching for a house, educating the real estate agent about the real purpose of a basement. While I had joined the NMRA in college, I wasn't active. An invitation to a Mid-Central Region – Division 1 meeting propelled me to learn what the NMRA had to offer. I soon found myself responsible for Division 1's 1988 MCR convention layout tour (in the days before Google Maps). Editorship of the Division 1 monthly Peddler Freight newsletter came next. These projects brought me to the beginning of my MMR® journey when I received the Association Volunteer certificate in 1992.

About this time, our 8-year-old son Tim's fascination with aviation led the family into the R/C flying hobby. Layout construction slowed because we had so much fun at the flying field as a family. Soon, a yearlong production plant construction project in West Virginia had me commuting home on some weekends in the mid-1990s with nothing getting done in the basement. The V&T layout in our Ohio home was dismantled in 1997 when we were transferred to the production plant in West Virginia. To my shock, I learned that most houses in our area did not have basements, and none were available during our one-week house hunt.

Model aviation continued as our family hobby throughout our son's high school years. He went on to earn an aviation degree in 2005 from Southern Illinois University. He's now a captain for Southwest Airlines. This entire time without a layout was not train-free — I continued to acquire more books and conduct more research on the V&T.

In 2009, I decided to pick up model railroading again. I chose the 1875 V&T as my era because the "Big Bonanza" was near its peak. I had been preparing drawings and collecting information for three decades, so I eagerly jumped back in. I like

trestle bridges, so I started big — V&T's Gold Hill Crown Point Trestle (CPT). The bridge measures 351 feet long and 85 feet tall, and I built it to 100 percent HO scale, detailing it as accurately as possible. It contains 2,000-plus pieces of scale lumber and more than 8,400 nut-bolt-washer castings.

With our son married and out on his own, I acquired his bedroom and began constructing my current layout in 2012. Progress was slow due to 24/7 on-call responsibilities at work. Since retirement in 2021, the pace has greatly improved!

I was a lone wolf modeler. When Chris, my wife of 41 years, got sick and entered hospice in 2021, she was more worried about me than what was happening to her. She encouraged me to rejoin the NMRA so that I would get out and meet new people with similar interests. Even though I belong to a small Division, I've met some wonderful modelers I now call friends. At each meeting, our AP Chair Bob Weinheimer (MMR® #402) encourages the group to join the program or keep pushing forward if started. Looking through the certificate requirements, I realized I had almost completed all of the construction for Scenery and Structures. I received those at the end of 2022.

The expansion of my layout into the office, two closets, and a stairwell gave me the opportunity to work on the Civil and Electrical certificates. I received those in the summer of 2023. Having only completed one scratchbuilt Merit-awarded piece of rolling stock left a lot of car building to be done. Superdetailing a V&T locomotive was also required to complete Prototype Models.

Construction continues on the scenery and hundreds of structures required to fill in the remaining areas of my layout. Invitations to join Bob's and future MMR® Jerry Doyle's (Jerry has earned six certificates) operating sessions showed me another fun part of the hobby. I am excited to begin hosting operating sessions and sharing my layout and love of the model railroading hobby with others.

Certificates Earned
Don Cipolla, MMR® #760

Association Volunteer
Master Builder – Scenery
Master Builder – Structures
Model Railroad Engineer – Electrical
Model Railroad Engineer – Civil
Master Builder – Cars
Master Builder – Prototype Models